

A Different Way to Look at Leadership

By Peter DeArmond

What words and phrases come to mind when you hear someone say "leadership"?

That's the first question I ask the students in a college course I teach on leadership skills. The answers I hear typically include words like charismatic, bold, wise, authoritative, decisive and inspiring. One phrase I hear a lot is "someone who gets things done."

I can't find fault with any of those words, but I do think there's something missing. In our culture there's a misperception that leadership is always tied to an individual who makes things happen by being strong and decisive. Perhaps this is due to the typical way leaders are portrayed in the news media, in movies, and on TV shows. Or perhaps it's something we're accustomed to hearing during election years.

It's not a new phenomenon. Throughout our history we've seen political candidates talk about all the things that they're going to do to fix the country because, after all, they're leaders. The news channels are filled with the crossfire of claims and political prattle from candidates who will make things right. And so we endure the wacky quotes that make the news and we say "that's politics."

But that's not leadership.

Real leadership has very little to do with what title you hold, the worldly success you achieved, how well you appeal to peoples' emotions, or how often you call attention to yourself with brazen declarations. As the late J. Donald Walters said, "Leadership is not a trumpet call to self-importance."

So let's forget politics for a moment. What about organizations — corporate, small business, non-profit, educational — how does real leadership make a difference there?

All the research clearly indicates that in a healthy organization, real leadership is all about forming and sustaining effective teams and relationships that are focused on fulfilling the organizational mission in a positive way. In a healthy, dynamic organization, the leadership creates an environment where every employee embraces the mission of the organization — the purpose and reason why it exists — and can express how his or her job contributes to that mission.

This sounds like textbook stuff, right? In fact, many organizational leaders say they do this. In reality, most employees will tell you they're hearing nice-sounding aphorisms that turn out to be meaningless rhetoric. But in the most dynamic organizations the concept is applied and measured by specific behaviors.

For example, team leaders will ask employees about a shared value, such accountability: "What does it look like when people assume accountability for a particular goal or outcome?"

What behaviors do they exhibit?" Employees discuss the answers — it's not dictated to them — and then they define and practice the behaviors because they relate to them as authentic, personal values.

The most effective leaders I know often act as collaborators, facilitators and team builders who foster an environment in which people embrace this idea: every role is doing something important to make the organization successful. This actually happens when there's a healthy organizational culture.

My college students are surprised when I tell them the most important thing a leader can do is foster a healthy culture. That sounds too text-bookish, right? The reality is, some kind of culture — good or bad — will always form in any organization. For a leader to form a healthy, strong culture, there needs to be a consensus on what are the core values that guide every person's behavior. An outside facilitator is often used to begin this process.

All of this is easier said than done. Most corporate leaders feel intense pressure from shareholders and board members to show ever-increasing growth of revenue and profit margins as an indicator of organizational health. What often results is a sad cycle: they find themselves taking steps to make the numbers look good, which often leads to decisions that hurt the soul of the organization — the people. It reminds me of a comment by the late UCLA basketball coach John Wooden: "I worry that business leaders are more interested in material gain than they are in having the patience to build up a strong organization, and a strong organization starts with caring for their people."

To form a strong, healthy culture, the leadership team has to be committed to working on it all the time, and so does everyone else in the organization. Values are meaningless unless they translate into real, specific behaviors. When everyone in an organization shares core values and practices the behaviors that identify the values, amazing things happen. But don't expect it to happen overnight. Forming a healthy culture is the most important thing for any organization's long-term health, but it takes a long-term commitment to form.

If you're interested in learning more about leadership and forming an organization culture, please contact me at [peter \(at\) kerndelta.com](mailto:peter@kerndelta.com)